

# THE LIVING THEOLOGICAL HERITAGE

OF THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

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## *Doing Theology*

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The Preamble to the Constitution of the United Church of Christ states that the UCC “claims as its own the faith of the historic Church expressed in the ancient creeds and reclaimed in the basic insights of the Protestant Reformers,” and that it “affirms the responsibility of the Church in each generation to make this faith its own. . . .”

During the prolonged union negotiations between the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church major theological controversies did not arise. All parties agreed that theologically the new church would draw upon the legacy of the ancient church and the sixteenth-century Reformation, and that there were fresh and vital ways by which twentieth-century Christians might make this faith their own. The UCC Statement of Faith (1959) set a tone that enabled the new denomination to articulate its convictions by celebrating God’s deeds and calling Christians into action (see vol. 7:3).

### **Developing a Theological Center**

The United Church of Christ was theologically confident at its birth, but not particularly theologically self-conscious. UCC writers described the common biblical roots present in the life of the new church. They accepted various theological viewpoints in an irenic spirit and without fanfare (see vol. 7:52). Members of theological faculties, as well as pastors and many lay leaders, shared a common respect for Christian doctrine. They could not conceive of the church without it. Yet, other themes claimed attention, alongside deepening social issues. Although the diversity of the United Church of Christ was admired and people were inspired by the evolving and passionate presence of the UCC in society, there were critics. They charged that the UCC was little more than a social-action group, effective perhaps, but theologically undiscerning. They insisted that the UCC took theology “for granted.” They pointed to a fuzzy ecclesiology. Criticisms, some of them loving, persisted. In response the UCC reminded its critics that the vocation of the church is foremost “to tell the Christian

story to people in winsome ways" (see vol. 7:53), while affirming the rich theological heritage of the church.

Although the theological life of the UCC was surely imperfect and incomplete, over time it became more articulate.

In 1982 the UCC *Leader's Box* defined theology as "what is believed about God and all that is related to God." It claimed that theology draws upon the Bible and tradition, and also on personal experience and the contemporary life of the church. Theological identity is not simply a matter of substance. It is shaped by a process. It takes the form of "theological dialogue in search of the Word of God in the contemporary setting" (see vol. 7:54).

By the 1970s many United Church of Christ leaders spoke about their church as finding its theological voice in an action-reflection lifestyle (see vol. 7:28). This sometimes led to a paradoxical identity grounded in faith expressed in "contradictory impulses" (see vol. 7:55).

For this reason when asked about what they believed, UCC members felt comfortable lifting up key phrases embedded in the history and practice of their traditions. They insisted that the prayer of Jesus "that they may all be one," stood at the core of their commitment to church unity. They affirmed "in essentials unity, in nonessentials diversity, in all things charity." They asserted that faith statements are "testimonies rather than tests of faith." They grounded their faith in the hope that "there is yet more light and truth to break forth from God's Holy Word." And they affirmed "the priesthood of all believers" alongside the principle of "responsible freedom." For the United Church of Christ theology was a journey rather than a static possession (see vol. 7:56).

On this theological journey the church hears many voices; it sings many songs. It is marked by a long line of confessions and covenants through time. From one generation to the next the call is to embrace the journey, to love the theological challenge that is always present, and to celebrate the gospel.

## Clarifying Theological Identity

During the late 1970s, however, the various ad hoc patterns of theological affirmation used by the United Church of Christ were becoming increasingly inadequate. In 1971 the General Synod wrestled with what it called the "faith crisis" and the Office for Church Life and Leadership (OCLL) launched "faith exploration" programs. Soon a group of UCC leaders came together to reflect about the nature of "sound [theological] teaching" in the church. They were critical of the UCC, concerned that it was "excessively

accommodated to cultural values and perceptions." They "initiate[d] a new discussion" to lead "the whole church in a new act of faithfulness." For many it was an exciting time of "theological ferment," prompted by internal forces and influenced by growing interest in "liberation theologies" (see vol. 7:57).

At the same time, theologians in the UCC pressed for theological clarity. UCC theologian James Gustafson wrote about the need to reclaim a "theocentric" or "God-centered" worldview (see vol. 7:58). In 1983 a paper, drafted by a small group of UCC seminary faculty and eventually signed by thirty-nine theological education colleagues from all over the country, was sent to the UCC Executive Council. The "Letter from the Thirty-nine" theological educators warned that the United Church of Christ was facing a "Most Difficult and Urgent Time." It agreed with UCC president Avery Post that there was a "theological deficit" in the church and a "void in sustained, disciplined reflection." It called for "an articulation of faith in the life and witness of the church" to "faithfully witness to the bedrock truth of Jesus Christ in our common life" (see vol. 7:59).

The Executive Council responded with a statement entitled "Theological Renewal in the United Church of Christ" (March 1984). It celebrated the "explosion of theological expression" in the church. Not only were the theological educators calling for disciplined reflection, there was a renewed interest in spirituality, a new Council on Racial and Ethnic Ministries (COREM); a Committee on Pluralism; an emerging ecumenical theology around issues of baptism, eucharist, and ministry; and several other venues "involved in theological study and action."

Soon thereafter, the seven "closely related" seminaries of the United Church of Christ launched a new theological journal, *Prism: A Theological Forum for the United Church of Christ* (Fall 1985). Its editors challenged the entire church to enter into "clearheaded . . . thinking and disciplined speech" about theology.

At the same time, the Office for Church Life and Leadership (OCLL) convened a "Theology Work Group" of eleven people to explore the "Theological Foundations in this United Church of Christ" (June 1985). The work group set out to describe how the United Church of Christ does theology. It did not pretend to offer a definitive word, but shared its work as "a catalyst for further discussion and conversation" in regional theological convocations held throughout the country (1985–86) (see vol. 7:60).

Some people began to suggest that the UCC needed a new theological "book of creeds and platforms," like Williston Walker's *Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, or a new Statement of Faith. In that conversation the vision for what became *The Living Theological Heritage of*

the United Church of Christ (1995–2004) was born. It would not be a collection of “authoritative documents,” but a multivolume library of resources to inform and nurture theological maturity in the UCC. The living theological heritage of the UCC was vibrant, rich, and diverse, but most people did not know how to access its treasures.

Other grassroots theological developments emerged. In 1977 a small group of pastors and laity, involved in an anniversary celebration of the Evangelical Synod of North America in Chicago, recognized the need for more intentional intellectual work in the UCC. They organized the Biblical-Theological-Liturgical Group (the “BTL Club,” as it was affectionately called), which met yearly to share papers on the authority of scripture, the sacraments, confessions, and other theological topics. In 1979 at its meeting in East Petersburg, Pennsylvania, the group issued a statement calling the United Church of Christ to overcome its “acculturation” and to listen only to the one Word, Jesus Christ (see vol. 7:61).

Subsequently, the “BTL Club,” in collaboration with a new group seeking to contemporize the legacies of nineteenth-century Mercersburg theology (see vol. 3:26, 28 and vol. 7:68), convened the first “Craigville Colloquy” (1984). Meeting on the grounds of the old “Christian campground” on Cape Cod, it became the first of many yearly Craigville Colloquies dedicated to providing opportunities for grassroots theological work, always with an ecumenical component, within the framework of the UCC Constitution. Craigville sought to do theology “from below,” bringing together people from different theological perspectives in an effort to articulate common concerns. The first “Craigville Colloquy Letter” (1984) praised God for the “theological ferment” in the church and called the UCC to ground social witness in its biblical heritage and Christological center (see vol. 7:61).

Even as the Office for Church Life and Leadership (OCLL) convened the “Theology Work Group,” and the seminaries launched a new journal, and the “BTL Club” joined with the Mercersburg Society to sponsor Craigville Colloquies, the United Church of Christ was touched by the wider “charismatic movement.” During the faith crisis of the 1970s some UCC people became enthusiastic about revitalizing worship to focus upon the immediate religious experience of the Holy Spirit. The charismatic movement was often criticized for ignoring society while seeking escapist ecstasy, but UCC Charismatics insisted that oneness with the Spirit naturally supported the historic social commitments of the UCC. In 1977 the United Church of Christ Charismatic Fellowship was organized (see vol. 7:62).

Theological concerns within the United Church of Christ were also stimulated by the serious debate around human sexuality that took place at the 1977 General Synod. After the Synod vote on *Human Sexuality—A Preliminary Study* (see vol. 7:98), a minority caucus made up of delegates who voted against the *Sexuality* report organized a new special-interest group, the United Church People for Biblical Witness (UCPBW). Although the UCPBW was born as a protest against the sexual license that its leaders perceived present in the sexuality study, the UCPBW stated that it wanted to be “a positive force for biblical accountability, reformed practice, and spiritual renewal within, rather than against the United Church of Christ.”

For the next two synods the United Church People for Biblical Witness (UCPBW) urged the General Synod to reclaim what it believed to be a more orthodox understanding of scriptural authority on sexuality issues. When the UCPBW was unable to accomplish this goal, it decided that reform from the top down was a lost cause. Therefore, in late 1983 when UCPBW leaders met in Dubuque, Iowa, to discuss the future of their renewal work in the United Church of Christ, they reorganized to form a new organization committed to work from the “bottom up” to change the theological stance of the UCC. Taking a new name, “Biblical Witness Fellowship” (BWF), its leaders drafted the “Dubuque Declaration” (1983), summarizing their traditional or orthodox theology. BWF turned to some of the writings of UCC theologian Donald Bloesch at Dubuque Theological Seminary to support its stance, and it invited all like-minded UCC congregations to join the BWF by affirming the “Dubuque Declaration” (see vol. 7:63).

Theological ferment in the UCC took many different forms in the early 1980s. While those who lamented the decline of traditional theology formed the UCPBW and the BWF, in 1980 a group of UCC social activists organized a group called “Christians for Justice Action” (CJA) to promote justice issues within the UCC. In 1985, drawing upon the words of the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 58), CJA invited the UCC to recognize its preoccupation with the church rather than God’s ministry, its misplaced anxiety over falling membership statistics, its failure to challenge church members to grow, and its tendency to equate prosperity and happiness with the gospel. CJA read the words of Isaiah with new passion, calling the UCC to return to the cost and joy of discipleship at the core of its identity and mission (see vol. 7:95).

About the same time the General Synod also took several additional actions to strengthen the theological identity of the church. In 1985 it declared justice and peace to be church priorities for the next four years,

and it passed a pronouncement, “Affirming the United Church of Christ to be a Just Peace Church” (1985). Work leading to the pronouncement had begun in 1981 and led to the publication of a small study book entitled *A Just Peace Church* (1986), reminding everyone that making peace and doing justice are the God-given tasks of all Christians (see vol. 7:64).

The culture of the United Church of Christ was changing. Alongside increased racial and ethnic diversity more and more women were attending seminaries and becoming ordained as pastors and teachers. With its rising exposure to women’s leadership and its expanded awareness of the need for inclusive language the 1971 General Synod passed several progressive pronouncements advocating for women in church and society (see vol. 7:85 and 86). Feminist theology embraced a diversity of methods and began to rethink Christian theology. Christian feminists, “stretched by the more radical expression of women’s experience of the transcendent,” developed new views of power and value based upon models of participation, mutuality, and solidarity (see vol. 7:65).

By the end of the 1980s the United Church of Christ was clearly more theologically aware and had done some important things to clarify its theological identity. It had moved from theological self-critique and “ferment” to claim new theological self-confidence. Although it did not follow conventional patterns, the United Church of Christ was beginning to “come of age” theologically.

## Living with Theological Diversity

Maintaining the “theological health” of the United Church of Christ was a challenge. Yet, as the denomination matured it found a variety of ways to sustain its Christocentric conviction that its life was a gift from God and not a human accomplishment, even as it embraced theological diversity. The apostle Paul had written that “there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.” The United Church of Christ was seeking to live out its calling confident that “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:4–7, NRSV).

Theological vitality in the United Church of Christ took many forms. Drawing upon the historic theological legacies of the Reformation, the United Church of Christ continued to recognize the value of traditional theology and liturgy (see vol. 7:66). At the same time the United Church of Christ applauded the activist conviction that the “name and power of

Jesus Christ is indissolubly linked to the two-fold struggle for a new person and a new society” (see vol. 7:67).

Although the United Church of Christ valued the work of many of the sixteenth-century Protestant reformers, it also appreciated the ways in which nineteenth-century Mercersburg theology reminded the church of its “catholic” identity. During the early 1980s, the “Mercersburg Society” was formed to study and reappropriate the sacramental and liturgical insights of John Williamson Nevin and Philip Schaff and provide new opportunities for contemporary UCC clergy and laity to learn about the Mercersburg theological tradition (see vol. 3:26, 28, 33 and vol. 4:88, 90). Those who sought to nurture the Mercersburg perspective through common prayer and contemplation leading to “concrete action in the life of the Church and the world” founded the Order of Corpus Christi (see vol. 7:68).

In 1981 the United Church of Christ further stretched its theological self-understanding by adopting a “Resolution Toward a Covenant in Mission and Faith” with the Evangelical Church of the Union (EKU) in both East and West Germany. The year before, the EKU, one of the UCC “ancestors in the faith,” had acknowledged “the integrity of the faith and mission of the United Church of Christ” and voted “Kirchengemeinschaft” (the shaping of full community, or full communion) with the “members, ministers and sacraments” of the United Church of Christ (1980).

The United Church of Christ response to the EKU reflected a deepening of historic ties. During the 1930s, Eden Theological Seminary had granted an honorary degree (in absentia) to Martin Niemoeller, who had been imprisoned in a concentration camp in Germany for his theology and his resistance to National Socialism. Not long thereafter, the president of the seminary, Samuel Press, observed that the Confessing Church in Germany (of which Niemoeller was a leader) was training its pastors “for martyrdom.” “Kirchengemeinschaft” was born of such a spirit of faith, rooted in the biblical story and taking the violence, fractures, and needs of the world seriously. The United Church of Christ response to the EKU in 1981 was a sign that it saw itself linked in vital ways to other Christians seeking to be authentically present in the world and developing sound teaching for the “global village.” In “full communion” the UCC came to live less “nationally” and more and more “globally” (see 7:69).

Other ecumenical relationships further expanded UCC theological horizons. The church continued its participation in the Consultation on Church Union (COCU), which went back to 1962. The long-standing relationship with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) found new expression. The response of the United Church of Christ to the World Council of Churches

Faith and Order document on *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* and the involvement of the United Church of Christ in dialogue with Lutheran and Reformed churches also deepened UCC theological self-confidence (see vol. 7:107, 105, 106 and 110).

Rediscovering theological foundations and responding to theological and cultural diversity took many forms. It meant that the UCC became more intentional about its desire to be the “church”—a complete community of Christ’s people. General Synod actions and local church life during the 1980s reached out to people who were oppressed, marginalized, and different, giving new voice and recognition to: African Americans; women; gays, lesbians, and bisexuals; people with handicapping conditions; the poor; people from Spanish-speaking cultures; Asian and Pacific Islanders; and Indigenous peoples (see vol. 7:83, 84, 116, 89, 98, 97, 133, 128, and 120).

The affirmation of gays and lesbians in the UCC was extremely difficult for some members of the church to accept. There were those who found the situation intolerable. They summarized their unhappiness in the “Dayton Declaration” (1991), stating that it was time for “faithful members of the Church of Jesus Christ to call into account the leaders of an organized church that calls itself Christian.” The Dayton Declaration asserted that UCC leaders were guilty of altering the wording of scripture, advocating unbiblical sexual practices, denying the right to life, and rejecting the Great Commission. Writers of the Dayton Declaration asked the Biblical Witness Fellowship (BWF) to mobilize local churches to reject recent actions. They accused current United Church of Christ leaders of leading the church into “apostasy” (see vol. 7:70).

This was a painful time in the United Church of Christ. National leaders had difficulty understanding how their efforts to open the doors of the church to be more fully the body of Christ in the world were equated with “apostasy,” or departure from the church. It was a period of soul searching and, as is often the case, a time of attempting to attain greater theological clarity.

The theological energy that had generated the BTL Club, Sound Teaching, the Mercersburg Society, the Craigville Colloquies, the Order of Corpus Christi, the UCC Charismatic Fellowship, the Letter from the 39 Theological Educators, the UCC Theology Project, and the new theological journal *Prism* did not wane. As the 1980s gave way to the 1990s the United Church of Christ found fresh ways to nurture its theological life and sustain its Christocentric core, while remaining open to remarkable diversity.

In 1993 the General Synod passed a document “Toward the 21st Century: A Statement of Commitment.” Using four key theological phrases it affirmed the calling of the United Church of Christ to be “a church attentive to the Word,” to be “a church inclusive of all people,” to be “a church responsive to God’s call,” and to be “a church supportive of one another” (see vol. 7:71).

That same year, a convening committee for a new group, calling itself “Confessing Christ,” invited local UCC leaders and members to gather in three regional conversations. They suggested that clergy and laity needed to “engage in dialogue about the meaning and importance of the heritage of the United Church of Christ, the dangers present in its erosion, and its place in the new century.” Confessing Christ took as its theme the central statement of the 1934 Barmen Declaration (developed by the Confessing Church movement in Nazi Germany). “Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear, and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death” [Arthur Cochrane, *The Church’s Confession under Hitler*, 254]. Its organizers believed that there was a growing need to gather people together who loved the church “neither to ‘weep bitterly’ over the Church (which would be theologically irresponsible),” nor “to pound upon others (which would be uncharitable).” Rather, they invited Christians to “confess Christ”—to honor our shared baptism in Christ and to see how “dialogue with one another and with those who believed before we were born, can reform the life of the Church for the sake of its vocation in the world.” They called for regional centers to encourage thoughtful, joyous, and imaginative theological work (see vol. 7:72).

During 1993 the Office for Church Life and Leadership (OCLL) also updated the *UCC Inclusive Language Guidelines* and suggested that the “persistence” of the language issue in the church might be “a sign” that God is “prompting us to see it as more than a passing notion.” Language “allows all God’s people to readily recognize the dignity of their having been created in God’s image.” The updated guidelines challenged individuals, groups, local churches, and other church bodies to commit themselves to an “Inclusive Language Covenant” and to seek ongoing respectful dialogue on issues of language (see vol. 7:73).

Many congregations, pastors, and teachers throughout the UCC enthusiastically affirmed the diversity of the church’s life. Trusting in the Spirit, articles and sermons explored the power of language, inviting faithful Christians to “listen” and reminding them that “self-righteousness was the bane of both interpersonal and international relations” (see vol. 7:74 and 75).

## Reaching Out in Mission

In the midst of the challenges of the 1990s, the United Church of Christ kept its balance. It drew upon the thought of its founding leaders and sustained the dynamic interplay between confession and action. As the UCC was born, a small paperback book entitled *The Faith We Proclaim* (1961) summarized the “doctrinal viewpoint generally prevailing in the Evangelical and Reformed Church.” It reflected the belief that the church witnesses to God’s mighty acts in the history of the world and proclaims its faith in grateful response to those acts. Thirty years later the “mission and the message” of the church that it set forth remains fundamentally the same. God is in Christ “reconciling the world . . .” (2 Corinthians 5:19). The church “testifies to God’s deeds” through its ministry to the needs of society. In so doing it upholds “the reality and sovereignty of God’s order.” “The church cannot be itself unless it ministers to the world” (see vol. 7:76).

Furthermore, ministering to the world flows from covenants inherited from the past. As it reaches out, the United Church of Christ recognizes that it stands before God’s mercy seat, and its hope is in Jesus Christ who “transcends all memories.” In 1977, Joseph Evans, the third president of the UCC, called the church to a bold faith. “This boldness should make us dedicate the United Church of Christ to being a missionary instrument in the hand of God to bring about a commonwealth of love and justice in the world” (see vol. 7:77).

There were still those who believed that the United Church of Christ was not “theologically serious,” that its theology was merely “a series of ad hoc opinions usually added on to some practical concern,” or that it used theology to “justify positions already taken for other reasons.” When confronted with these criticisms the widely respected UCC theologian and ethicist Roger Shinn commented that “ad hoc theology is not entirely wrong. If God meets us in the midst of all the events of life, it is as likely that an urgent human demand will lead to a theological insight as that theology will lead to actions” (see vol. 7:77).

The United Church of Christ “does theology” its way. In its nearly fifty years of existence it has found and clarified its theological center and embraced its growing diversity. Its theological work, however, has not been done as “internal housekeeping.” When true to its mission, it worries about the future of the world, not the future of the church. It works to claim a new vision and to seek “justice with each move.” When the United Church Board for World Ministries (UCBWM) celebrated its 175th anniversary it sang about its calling to build “justice as the bulwark of the peace that God

would give.” When a National Conference on Mission, sponsored by the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries (UCBHM), produced the “Houston Statement on Mission” (1987), it affirmed the call and commitment of the church “to join oppressed and troubled people in the struggle for liberation” and “to work for justice, healing and wholeness of life” (see vol. 7:78).

At about the same time the United Church Board for World Ministries (UCBWM) refined its emerging understanding of mission as “partnership” — drawing upon biblical images of unity and interdependence. Around the world, as well as at home, the United Church of Christ sought to ground its theology of mission in mutual sharing as well as in mutual acceptance. As overseas churches became increasingly self-reliant and independent, they began to invite the United Church of Christ into relationships of trust and to share commitments to unity and common mission. The historic “mission boards” no longer existed as “agents” of mission for the church, but became channels for shared fellowship and work in the world (see vol. 7:79).

So what is the theological stance of the United Church of Christ? While it is difficult to summarize in classic terms, it remains grounded in the Christocentric affirmation that Jesus Christ is the Head of the church. It is fed and cultivated by grassroots faithfulness and controversy. It encourages and supports diversity without compromising its integrity and it ultimately works for justice and peace in the world. It is capable of risk for the sake of the truth of the gospel. It is also grounded in the mystery of life and knows itself to be a reflection of that mystery.

In the United Church of Christ, with all its diverse viewpoints, it can be said that theology begins in wonder — not the wonder of disinterested science, but the wonder of deep concern and personal involvement. This wonder leads to the conviction that Christian theology is “a confession of what God has done, of what God is doing, and of what God promises yet to do.” The United Church of Christ longs for theology that is biblically informed and contemporary; theology that remembers the “underlying divine-human encounter of revelation and response.” It seeks a theology that empowers Christians to act in the world in Christian freedom, not because they believe they can redeem the world, but because they have glimpsed the mystery that God in Christ loves the world and never tires of summoning the church to witness to the redemption of the world in both word and deed (see vol. 7:80).

## *Making a Difference*

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The Statement of Faith of the United Church of Christ is an affirmation of the presence of Jesus Christ in every aspect of life. It is a summons to discipleship that is both joyous and costly. Celebrating God's gracious and powerful presence among the faithful, it calls Christians to action in glad submission to the gospel. As a consequence, the UCC understanding of the church (its ecclesiology) emphasizes that it is a community of service to others and that this service is rooted in the good news about God in Christ. Standing deep within the world-changing Reformed tradition, the United Church of Christ is a people called not only to keep liturgies and say prayers. It is also asked to resist the powers of evil. With other Christians, UCC members share in Christ's baptism, eat at Christ's table, and join in Christ's passion and victory. Their faith is meant to reflect the discipleship of the earliest followers of Jesus. They do not turn away from the world, but work and witness in the midst of its wonder, its sorrow, and the injustices that scar the times in which they live.

A commitment to social justice and the service the church owes to God and to neighbor is not anchored in human reason or principle, nor in human virtue or conscience. Rather, faith expressed in public witness to the gospel is a responsibility the church accepts, sometimes reluctantly, in response to its divine summons to discipleship. The United Church of Christ, like other denominations, is called to offer a reply to the fact of the Incarnation. It acknowledges in its liturgies that however bold its deeds, they are always incomplete and often marked inappropriately by self-acclaim. Invariably, the church, in the midst of its mission or its social action, is tempted to lose its way. For this reason, its commitment in faith to "social justice" and "ministries of benevolence" is best accompanied by prayer, the prayer of the tax collector in the parable Jesus tells about the pharisee and the tax collector, "God, be merciful unto me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13). The challenge that faces the church, in addition to remaining awake to its vocation, is never to forget to ask the question, "How can people of faith know the will of God so that they may do the will of God?" This question, in one form or another, never goes away.

The United Church of Christ takes this question seriously. In its most faithful moments it is inspired by the mystery that God in Christ loves the world, and acknowledging dependence upon the Holy Spirit to provide leadership in the ways of truth, it acts to make a difference in the world. It remembers that it can make a difference, only because God has already made a difference. Its witness takes many forms.

## Promoting Racial Justice

For example, when the UCC Office of Communication (OC) was created in 1959, it was not a typical denominational public relations office. Under the leadership of Everett C. Parker it worked diligently to safeguard the public interest in broadcasting, and specifically to advocate for the rights of people of color and for women. In the 1960s Charles Shelby Rooks, who chaired the OC Board, and Parker made the Office of Communication (OC) a watchdog at the Federal Communications Commission, challenging the renewal of the broadcast licenses of stations that discriminated against blacks in the South. In 1969 it won a landmark case against a television station in Jackson, Mississippi. Its success in defending the "public interest" and upholding the "fairness doctrine" on behalf of viewers and listeners, rather than broadcasters, is legendary.

Christians are called to proclaim God's Word and enable the search for meaning. In its report to the 1959 General Synod the Office of Communication set forth a theological rationale for its work. "If our goal is communication of the Faith, our aim must be to lead people into the Christian community, where they may risk the actions that are the ultimate tests of faith. Ideas and institutions have a place in such communication only as they are submitted to the test of the principles, ideas, ideals and possibilities of the Word" (see vol. 7:81).

The United Church of Christ's commitment to racial justice inspired activist work in the civil rights movement in the 1960s (see vol. 7:15–19). It also undergirded a decade-long struggle to free ten unjustly imprisoned young people convicted for conspiracy and the unlawful burning of a grocery store during a 1971 racial disturbance in Wilmington, North Carolina. The nine African Americans (one a UCC staff member) and a white woman VISTA worker became known as the "Wilmington 10." In the years that followed evidence surfaced that the witnesses in the trial lied when they testified against the Wilmington 10. Other irregularities highlighted the injustice of the defendants' conviction and imprisonment. Citing the admonition of scripture, "Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them" (Hebrews 13:3 NRSV), the United Church

of Christ committed thousands of dollars to provide bail, seek a new trial, and convince the governor of North Carolina to intervene in the case. In 1978 when the governor ignored the evidence and refused to pardon the innocent prisoners, United Church of Christ president Avery Post pledged the ongoing commitment of the UCC to racial justice. Affirming the belief that all followers of Jesus are imprisoned until all those who are innocent are free, the United Church of Christ continued to work for their freedom. Finally in 1980 the case was overturned and all charges dropped (see vol. 7:82).

Racial justice issues became more nuanced and subtle in the 1980s, but racism continued to flourish as a systemic and pervasive power in society. UCC leaders reminded the churches that "we are one people because we are reconciled to God in one body through the cross." Therefore where Asians or Blacks, Hispanics or Native Americans remained targets of racial violence and bigotry, the church confronted a severe theological problem. The "destructive symptoms" of racism, namely "poverty, crime, economic disadvantage, alienation, violence, and persecution," were a "gaping wound in the body of Christ" (see vol. 7:83).

In 1989 the General Synod passed a resolution "Challenging the Resurgence of Racism in the United States of America." It called for change, because "Racism is an expression of idolatry, replacing faith in God, who created all peoples equal in the image of God, with the belief in the superiority of one race over another" (see vol. 7:84).

A few years later the national leadership of the United Church of Christ issued a "Pastoral Letter on Contemporary Racism in the Church" (1991). Noting that despite significant progress, the "pervasive and destructive sin of racism" continues to prevail in society, it called the church to provide the leadership necessary to break the cycle of racial despair and move toward a future of equality and community. "Racism," the letter proclaimed, "is the intentional and unintentional use of power to isolate, separate and exploit based on race." Love for Jesus Christ and for neighbor requires the church to challenge such idolatry (see 7:84).

## Advocating with Women

Even as awareness and concern about the injustice of racism continued to inform the work of the United Church of Christ, the role and place of women became an increasingly important issue. This concern built upon the long-standing commitment of the heritage of the United Church of Christ to the ministries of women, both lay and ordained. Women preachers had been active among frontier Christians in the nineteenth century

(see vol. 4:8–11). Women clergy had served as ordained pastors in Congregational churches beginning in the 1850s (see vol. 4:77–79). Women missionaries, as partners with their husbands and as single women, had enriched the mission outreach of Reformed, Congregational, Christian, and Evangelical boards and synods (see vol. 4:7 and 8). In thousands of congregations laywomen supported global mission work and worked to meet the needs of church and community within local women's fellowships and guilds.

By the late 1950s, some women and men began suggesting that "separate denominational women's structures" were out of date. A national Council for Lay Life and Work (CLLW) was formed, lifting up the importance of the laity (women and men) in the mission of the Church. During the 1960s a new wave of feminist thinking led many younger women to press the national UCC for a fresh commitment to correct injustices related to women in church and society (see vol. 7:65).

In 1971 the General Synod passed a Pronouncement on "The Status of Women in Church and Society." Affirming the belief that God makes no distinction regarding the worth of males and females and that both are equal in God's sight, it stated that "distinctions made by society which assume an inferior-superior relationship are contrary to the will of God." The General Synod went on to establish a "Task Force on Women in Church and Society" (1971) with staff support in the Office of the President of the church (see vol. 7:85).

The 1971 General Synod also passed a proposal for action entitled "Freedom of Choice Concerning Abortion." Recognizing that there are many theological and ethical factors surrounding decisions about abortion, the proposal affirmed the responsibility of all men and women to share the work of creation with God. It stressed a reverence for human life and the need to protect the weak and defenseless. It stated that the present laws prohibiting abortion were unjust and unenforceable, compelling women to bear children or to seek illegal abortions. It called for the repeal of all legal prohibitions against physician-performed abortions, so that abortion would no longer fall under "the realm of penal law," but rather become a voluntary medically safe procedure available to all women. The concern behind the proposal was to place value on "personal life and upon the quality of life, both actual and potential," and to give women "freedom with responsibility." Even as it affirmed choice, however, it also acknowledged the church's obligation to aid in the resolution of the problem of unwanted pregnancies (see vol. 7:86).

Abortion presents the church with one of the most divisive issues in our society. People of faith and compassion may have different convictions

about abortion, but most concede that abortion is never an ideal solution for unwanted pregnancies. The General Synod of the UCC has agreed, but it also has consistently said that alternatives which deny women options are worse. For over thirty years, understanding abortion as a profound theological and social issue, the majority of delegates to UCC General Synods have not changed their opinions. When delegates struggle with this issue, they rarely speak of abortion as a "right," but rather as a tragic choice that is always morally ambiguous. Although in 1987 a small minority that could not condone abortion under any circumstance formed a special-interest group called "UCC Friends for Life," the majority of delegates to General Synods and most UCC members uphold the belief that not to be able to choose is even more problematic (see vol. 7:87).

As the United Church of Christ spoke out on these issues, some people felt that the UCC was becoming too "feminist," while others argued that it was not doing enough for women. In 1975 a Task Force report on the Status of Women in Church and Society pressed for more advocacy. From 1975 to 1979 an Advisory Commission on Women developed new ways to support women clergy and laywomen. In 1979 a Coordinating Center for Women in Church and Society (CCW) sought to "address the concerns of women and seek strategies to eliminate sexism in church and society." That same year the General Synod (1979) voted to support the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) and reaffirmed its support four years later (1983). Women in the United Church of Christ were increasingly visible in the national leadership, and in 1983 Carol Joyce Brun was elected secretary of the UCC, the first woman to hold a nationally elected office.

Throughout this period the relationship between racism and sexism in church and society became even more obvious. In 1977 the General Synod passed a "Pronouncement on Racism and Sexism" that summoned the church to continue its struggle with these issues as they "interact, intersect, and compound each other." Those who have been set free in Christ to the service of God and neighbor should be among the first to understand that "Human liberation means new consciousness of oppression and rising expectations concerning the future" (see vol. 7:88).

Unfortunately, at least as far as many women were concerned, the United Church of Christ Coordinating Center for Women in Church and Society (CCW) had remained only an administrative office under the Office of the President since its creation in 1979. In 1987 CCW's report to General Synod called the church to remember the "bent over woman" who is met by Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. Jesus tells her that she is free of her illness and able to "straighten herself up." In that spirit, women leaders in the UCC insisted that it was time for the UCC to establish an "ongoing

office or instrumentality to continue the long journey toward God's intended equality for women and men," and they successfully made the case for the Coordinating Center for Women to become a permanent established instrumentality of the United Church of Christ (see vol. 7:89).

## Speaking Out on Social Issues

The demands of the Christian gospel require seeing life differently, through the lens of faith, both in the local setting and in the wider society. There are times, carefully chosen, when Christians best remain silent and retreat to quiet places. But there are other moments when Christians need to speak out, lifting their voices and staking out a position on behalf of the voiceless (Proverbs 31:8).

Building upon the "Call to Christian Action in Church and Society" passed by the General Synod in 1959 (see vol. 7:15), the United Church of Christ has sought to sustain an ongoing activist stance on many social problems: such as apartheid, justice and peace in the Middle East, human rights, and generic engineering. In attempting to address these issues, theological reflection provided the foundation for action. Yet, there were also times when theological grounding for the church's social statements was merely implied or only faintly articulated. Actions were taken that only later generated theological reflection. There were other weaknesses. For example, the inability of the church to give persistent attention to labor and to the justice issues of the working class, even though many UCC members were blue-collar workers was criticized. Living with its strengths and weaknesses, the UCC has attempted to address social problems with the gospel entrusted to it. And in its most faithful moments, it has remembered that Christian discipleship depends upon God's gift of grace, vitally alive in the midst of an imperfect human community.

The witness of the United Church of Christ illustrates the interplay between theological conviction and action in the world. It is a stance suggested by the bumper sticker: "To believe is to care, to care is to do." Such movement between confession and action, word and deed, has been a consistent challenge for the UCC. UCC members know very well that they have not always succeeded in carrying out God's mission in the cities, affirming human rights as foundational to the Christian faith, or wrestling with vexing and complicated questions, such as economic justice.

The social justice commitments of the United Church of Christ come from several crucial sources: the teachings of Jesus, the reality of the cross and the resurrection, the voices of the biblical prophets, the Reformed tradition (in which the rule of Christ over politics, society, and the soul of

the church is stressed), and the theology and experience of multiracial and multicultural UCC members who have courageously born witness to the gospel amidst the troubles of the world. Although most UCC congregations are not urban, many have consistently attempted to take civic life seriously. Their clergy proclaim the good news of individual salvation in Jesus Christ, speaking of God who in Christ has promised "a new heaven and a new earth" (Revelation 21:1). Drawing upon scripture, its theological heritage, and the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit, the UCC is committed to the common good and to the civic fabric of society. It is a matter of Christian obedience. It is a reflection of the church's commitment to the truth of what it confesses.

Thousands of UCC people participated in the 1963 March on Washington, for example, led in large measure by African American leaders. National Council of Churches leadership, especially former UCBHM staff member Robert (Bob) Spike, helped mobilize thousands of white church leaders. The UCC Council for Christian Social Action (CCSA) helped send many UCC clergy to Mississippi in the spring of 1964 (see vol. 7:19). UCC lay leaders and clergy worked for justice and delivered sermons at public hearings. They were confident that although the church cannot build the "kingdom of God" on earth or "pray down the New Jerusalem," it can witness to its faith that "God will transform (the) old town into New Jerusalem" (see vol. 7:90).

UCC leaders have offered fresh and inspired leadership to some of the historic city mission societies. These urban leaders have spoken about being "born again." By this they do not mean some private rebirth, but the need for all Christians to be reborn into "a radical stance toward the world and the structures of society" where they will be able to "see the face of Jesus in the faces of the suffering" (see vol. 7:91). Leaders have prayed for "those victimized by oppression, political expediency and the apathy of the powerful," while at the same time giving thanks for all communities of people "bent on justice" (see vol. 7:92).

Supported by the Commission for Racial Justice (CRJ) and the Office for Church and Society (OCIS), the United Church of Christ has resisted the temptation to turn away from the world. Bearing witness to the divine intention for a world that is both compassionate and humane, members of the UCC have spoken out, lobbied, boycotted, consoled, and prayed that the collective life of the world might become more just.

When millions of the world's people sought basic human rights, freedom to live where they wanted, liberation from oppressive governments, escape from war, and opportunity to start over, the United Church of Christ attempted to find resources within its theological and liturgical soul. Some

of its members, for example, remembered biblical words about the importance of sanctuary. They recognized the role of companionship in times of danger. They responded to the grief and pain of neighbors and reclaimed an understanding of Jesus Christ as the One who brings refuge, peace, and hope. Communities of faith gathered around the communion table were reminded that Christians do not look for Christ in the nouns, but meet Christ in the verbs. “This is my body *broken* for you; this is my blood *shed* for you” (see vol. 7:93).

In 1989 the General Synod passed a “Pronouncement on Christian Faith, Economic Life and Justice.” This lengthy pronouncement viewed economic justice as an issue of faith. Noting the marks of a just economy, it challenged unexamined assumptions about capitalism while at the same time recognizing the need for more accountability in healthy democratic systems. God is “not only of the past and present, but . . . of the future” (see vol. 7:94).

Convictions within the UCC on social issues, while intensely practical, have not always been unified. There have been ongoing and lively debates over the relationship between the gospel’s meaning and the work of the church. Some believe that the UCC is too radical. Others think that the gospel calls for greater risks.

In the early 1980s those who feared that the UCC was losing its “missional” courage founded “Christians for Justice Action” (CJA) — an organization within the UCC looking “at human life and the decisions of our world’s societies in new ways.” During the “theological ferment” inspired by such grassroots developments as “Sound Teaching,” “A Most Difficult and Urgent Time,” the “Craigville Colloquies,” and the “Dubuque Declaration” (see vol. 7:57, 59, 61, and 63), CJA did its own theological work. It lifted up the fifty-eighth chapter of Isaiah as a guide to help contemporary Christians recognize anew the dialogue between God’s Word and modern experience, between reflection and practice. CJA insisted that being true to the biblical vision requires leaders to “offset” “centrist accommodations to politics within the church and the world.” “Contrary to what our culture prefers from people of faith,” Christians are called to choose “direct political action and expressions of outrage against injustice.” This may “cause division within the church, but such is the nature of biblical witness” (see vol. 7:95).

## Affirming the Wholeness of Life

The life of the United Church of Christ is a mixture of healing and activism, word and deed. Historically the church is witness to the reconciliation of the world by God in Christ. In response Christians engage in service that

has been redeemed in Christ through various ministries of reconciliation. Diaconal service has always been part of the church, and the United Church of Christ has carried on that legacy, finding many significant ways to affirm healing and the wholeness of life.

When the followers of John the Baptist asked Jesus if he was the Messiah, he did not answer their question. Rather, he told them to go and tell John what they saw, “the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them” (Luke 7:22 NRSV). The churches that came together to form the United Church of Christ had been involved in establishing and maintaining many institutions devoted to ministries of healing, health, and welfare. Hospitals, homes for orphans and the aged, and programs of assistance for those with special physical and mental needs had been strongly supported by UCC congregations for years.

These caring ministries, however, were never separate from social witness. “The key is to affirm and spiritually unite health and welfare issues with direct services as part of *one* health and welfare mission.” When this occurs, Christian love can be characterized as *total* caring (see vol. 7:96).

Consequently the United Church of Christ has looked deeply into the promise of the gospel that God’s love is unconditional. It has invited Christians to reexamine biblical texts and the conditions that have caused persons to be viewed as inferior or broken. Instead of calling for pity or condemnation, the United Church of Christ has challenged common assumptions about wholeness and health and worked for change in numerous ways. Its work in two areas is especially noteworthy: (1) its ministries of advocacy for persons with handicaps (an earlier word) or disabilities, and (2) its ministries of advocacy for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered persons. In both cases, it has pressed for new thinking about all human beings and about the radical love present in the gospel. While supporting the visibility and the importance of traditional family bonds in the UCC Book of Worship “Order for Marriage,” it has insisted that Jesus offers wholeness and community to all persons, and that the church must do the same.

In 1977 the General Synod passed a pronouncement on “The Church and Persons with Handicaps.” It recognized the fragility of all life, it called for caring for those in need, and it challenged the church to help those who “suffer hardness of heart toward the handicapped.” It suggested that suffering may not always be “the enemy to be overcome,” but might actually be “a means of grace.” It condemned the tendency to “locate human dignity in normality and achievement” and challenged the church to change its attitudes and actions (see vol. 7:97).

As the years passed the United Church of Christ sought to help Christians recognize that persons with disabilities (not handicaps) have tremendous contributions to make to church and society. Harold Wilke, a charismatic UCC minister born with no arms, reminded the UCC of the gospel message that we are accepted into God's love, "not by our deeds or by our being, but by the grace of God." In God, he insisted, everything is made perfect in weakness. In our weakness, we are like people in those crowds that followed Jesus. We yearn for wholeness; we need supportive companions; and we find courage in God's grace (see vol. 7:97).

In 1969 the General Synod passed a resolution on "Homosexuals and the Law." This resolution, which spoke out against antiquated laws limiting the civil rights of homosexuals, was the first in a long line of national UCC actions protecting the civil liberties of homosexual persons. After 1972, when William Johnson became the first openly gay person ordained to the Christian ministry by a major Protestant denomination in the United States, the UCC Executive Council adopted a statement to guide conferences and associations in their ordination decisions. It said that "in the instance of considering a stated homosexual's candidacy for ordination, the issue should not be his/her homosexuality as such, but rather the candidate's total view of human sexuality and his/her understanding of the morality of its (expression)." Many ordaining bodies supported the Executive Council, adding that a candidate should be considered for authorized ministry on the basis of his or her faith, biblical and theological competence, and love for the church and its ministry.

Nevertheless, by 1975 the General Synod acknowledged that many in the United Church of Christ had not "faced in depth the issue of human sexuality," and therefore it commissioned a study to explore the dynamics of human sexuality and to recommend postures for the church. *Human Sexuality: A Preliminary Study* was presented to the 1977 General Synod. It was a controversial study that defined sexuality as emotional, physical, cognitive, value-laden, spiritual, personal, and social. "Sexuality is a central dimension of each person's selfhood, but it is not the whole of that selfhood. It is a critical component of each person's self-understanding and of how each relates to the world" (see vol. 7:98).

Debates over the *Human Sexuality* study were deep and difficult. By the end of the 1977 General Synod the report had been received with appreciation and commended to the whole church for study and response. Unfortunately, the debates and vote (409 yes and 210 no, or 66 percent–34 percent) left a minority very dissatisfied. Following the vote that minority organized and returned to the next several General Synods seeking a new vote. After several unsuccessful attempts to reverse the vote on the *Human*

*Sexuality* study, the group evolved into a new biblical/theological special-interest group within the United Church of Christ known as the United Church People for Biblical Witness (UCPBW), which became the Biblical Witness Fellowship (BWF) in 1983 (see vol. 7:63).

Generally speaking the majority of congregations in the United Church of Christ were concerned but open about issues of sexuality. Many of them upheld the civil rights of gay and lesbian persons and did not wish to see them compromised.

The 1985 General Synod passed a resolution "Calling on United Church of Christ Congregations to Covenant as Open and Affirming (ONA)." It invited local congregations to go on record as open communities of faith, welcoming lesbian, gay, and bisexual people by adopting a "covenant of openness and affirmation," or by passing an "inclusive non-discrimination policy." More importantly the United Church of Christ developed resources and a process to help local congregations study the issue and make a decision. Among UCC congregations and clergy the issue generated lively debates, with some congregations ignoring and/or avoiding it, some finding the process destructive, some finding the process liberating, and others embracing the idea but refusing to "go on record," be "listed" or "labeled." Fifteen years after the General Synod resolution, approximately 350 "ONA congregations" were listed by the UCC Coalition for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered (LGBT) Concerns (see vol. 7:98).

Many members of the United Church of Christ, laity and clergy, insist that if Jesus Christ is head of the church there can be no rationale for exclusion because of sexual orientation. By 1997 the conference ministers, acknowledging that the issue of homosexuality was still a "disputed question" among faithful members of the church, sent a letter to the church urging further dialogue, especially about the issue of same-sex blessings. In 1998 it was followed by a "pastoral letter" written by UCC president Paul Sherry that drew attention to the increase of hate crimes and expressed regret over the decisions of Christian denominations to exclude gay, lesbian, and bisexual persons from sharing in the full ministry of the church. Citing Romans 8:1, he insisted "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (NRSV) and sought to offer a clear statement on what it means to be an inclusive church (see vol. 7:99).

The commitment of the United Church of Christ to health and wholeness has taken many forms during its history. It was quick to speak out about the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) epidemic in the early 1980s and to follow through with pronouncements and resolutions leading to action. Its faith-based thinking about genetic engineering, infant

formula, hospice care, mental illness, substance abuse, and national health care policies has been consistent and significant.

From the birth of the United Church of Christ in 1957, statements by its leaders and actions by its General Synods have been remarkably outspoken. When many other national denominational bodies remained tentative and/or silent, the General Synod of the United Church of Christ went on record out of its concern to make a difference and to bring words and deeds together. It has been heard in the wider society, it has allocated national resources to educate, and it has empowered staff to act in its name.

One reason for this difference is that in the UCC the General Synod is not a traditional representative body and its actions can never be viewed as a formal expression of local or regional thinking. When the General Synod gathers, although its delegates reflect the diversity and geography of the churches back home, they are not instructed or bound by the opinions of those who send them to synod. The process during each General Synod encourages every delegate to engage each issue with a fresh and open mind and to vote as she or he feels led by the Spirit (see vol. 7:22).

The results of this process are sometimes surprising, even to the delegates themselves; and the UCC General Synod finds itself taking risks, speaking to the congregations from the end of a long limb. This has been upsetting to some members of the church, but it has also turned out to be a prophetic gift. Although local congregations are not formally bound by General Synod actions, they are encouraged to respect and value the work of each General Synod. As a consequence, the actions of General Synods not only confront, but also stretch the thinking and theological work in local congregations. Many find it difficult to ignore the General Synod of the United Church of Christ, empowered by pronouncements and resolutions, as it speaks out on extremely controversial, yet vital, issues.

This form of church order is unusual. It is misunderstood regularly by the general public and even by UCC members and clergy in local congregations. The General Synod does not "speak for" the thousands of congregations that make up the UCC. It "speaks to" them. When each General Synod gathers, under the headship of Jesus Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit, it challenges all UCC members in local communities of faith to rethink again and again what it means to have "courage in the struggle for justice and peace" and to keep word and deed, faith and life, together. It further chides them to remember the prayer of the tax collector, ". . . be merciful to me, a sinner."